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SUBJECT: MARAWI CITY: ISLAMIC PRIDE IN THE TROUBLED SOUTH

REF: A. MANILA 804

[B](#). 04 MANILA 5903

[1](#)1. (U) Summary. Marawi, the capital of Lanao del Sur Province in Central Mindanao, is officially an "Islamic city" under municipal law, the only such city in the Philippines. The city of 125,000 is 96-percent Muslim. The main campus of Mindanao State University, located in Marawi, is a nonetheless cosmopolitan bubble of Christian-Muslim understanding and a crossroads of orthodox and progressive Islamic thought. City officials are nonetheless striving to make Marawi a purely Islamic enclave by legislating conservative laws based on the Koran, while flatly rejecting comparisons to the fundamentalist-oriented Taliban. The city has a small Christian minority, which has generally good relations with city officials. The local Catholic Bishop is active in promoting interfaith understanding and reconciliation. Despite its Islamic identity, the city is plagued with an epidemic of drug abuse among local youth as well as a culture of revenge violence. Marawi City and its leaders are proud of a city where Islamic values flourish, while remaining eager for and receptive to US engagement efforts. End Summary.

Students And Townsfolk Appreciate Advocacy Visit

[1](#)2. (U) Poloff visited Marawi City February 12-14 to speak about US foreign policy at a conference organized by students from the College of International Relations at the main campus of Mindanao State University (MSU). The students were receptive to poloff's remarks on US interests in Mindanao, which stressed development and education as tools in combating terrorism. The audience appeared grateful for the Embassy's participation (representatives from the Department of Foreign Affairs dropped out). Other speakers included MSU faculty members and local media personalities (one an International Visitor grantee). Questions were largely non-hostile, apart from occasional expressions of suspicion of US "hegemony." Poloff's explanations of US global engagement emphasized security, prosperity, and democracy as central goals. Poloff's separate impromptu remarks on US development objectives and support for the Mindanao peace process (translated into the local dialect for the weekly "flag-raising" gathering of government employees at the Provincial Capital Complex) received applause and approval.

MSU: A Moderate Bubble

[1](#)3. (U) Mindanao State University's Marawi campus has 17 associated schools and colleges, offering law, Islamic Studies, engineering, nursing, agriculture, international relations, and other programs. There are 12,000 students at the campus, of whom 80-percent are Muslim. The university prides itself on being a progressive-oriented learning institution. According to Vice Chancellor Macabangkit Ati, several MSU graduates have won national trade and vocational awards, and the university promotes inter-faith understanding as part of its mandate to provide quality higher education to all of Mindanao -- comparatively one of the most education-deprived regions of the country.

[1](#)4. (U) MSU-Marawi is also home to the King Faisal Center for Islamic, Arabic, and Asian Studies, where students take academic degree programs and classes on Islamic law, Islamic history, Arabic language, and international relations. The Center also operates a Koranic school, administered by Rachid Ouabed, an Algerian. Ouabed also has a Palestinian on his staff. (Both immigrated to the Philippines, married local women, and now live and work in Marawi.) The school operates under an agreement with the MSU Board of Regents, but receives funding from the Muslim World League, based in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The school is similar to a madrassah and conducts all of its classes in Arabic. The school's compound features a library full of donated books in Arabic, several classrooms, and a spacious cafeteria and bathing facilities. Ouabed told poloff the school is planning phased renovations that will include boarding rooms and a separate building for girls. Poloff visited one classroom with about

40 students, all boys in their early teens, studying Koran-based science in Arabic. The students and administrators were friendly.

15. (SBU) The King Faisal Center also houses the Marawi chapter of the Center for Moderate Muslims (CMM) (ref A). One of the CMM organizers -- MSU faculty member and Embassy contact Hamid Barra -- explained that the difficulty in promoting moderate ideals is due in part to the lack of mass communication (no electricity) and the low literacy level, especially in rural areas. "Extremists" easily visit rural mosques, where they can teach "militant ideals" with impunity, he claimed. The CMM supports peace initiatives such as livelihood programs and family development. With international partners such as the World Bank, the UN Development Program, and the Asia Foundation, CMM reaches out to local poor communities to provide literacy training, he noted.

Islamic Pride and Conservatism

16. (SBU) Marawi is a self-proclaimed "Islamic City," and in that tradition city officials have enacted local laws based on the Koran. Several city council members described to poloff how their Islamic leadership relates to the national secular constitution. Two recent city ordinances ("based on interpretations of the Koran") were of particular interest: one requiring all Muslim women to wear Islam-appropriate clothing, specifically a headscarf; and another "restricting gays" and banning cross-dressing males. Both ordinances prescribe increasing monetary fines with each offense and the possibility of incarceration on the third offense.

17. (SBU) Marawi City Mayor Omar Ali and the city councilors have stressed collectively that the laws are to "protect Islamic culture" in Marawi and to present the city as Islamic-friendly to the Muslim world. According to one official, the city even discourages men from wearing shorts. City councilors contended that, without the ordinances, Muslim women would be at risk of harassment or physical assaults for not wearing appropriate dress. Officials discounted a comment that Marawi might be transforming into a "Taliban-esque" city. Female councilor Jehanne Mutin-Mapupuno noted that the Maranao tribe -- based in Marawi and the surrounding Lanao provinces -- is the most conservative of the three main Muslim ethnicities in the Philippines. (Note: Marawi is 90-percent Maranao, and many prefer to speak the Maranao dialect instead of Tagalog. The other two main Muslim ethnicities are the Maguindanao, centered on the province of the same name, and the Tausug, based in the Sulu Archipelago. End Note.) "There is religious freedom" in Marawi, she insisted, emphasizing that the ordinances are an expression of how Muslims "should" act. As leaders of Marawi, the city counselors had a responsibility to "protect" Islam from "corrupting influences," she claimed. In reference to the anti-homosexual ordinance, one councilor claimed to be tolerant of gays, but stressed "they should not act like women while in Marawi."

Little if any enforcement

18. (SBU) According to the sponsor of the headscarf ordinance, local people largely supported both measures. However, one MSU student told poloff the ordinances are indeed a concern to the student body. The student noted that this is in large part due to the interfaith and cosmopolitan nature of the university. There is apparently discussion of exempting the MSU campus, in the city's outskirts, from the ordinances, either explicitly or by default.

19. (SBU) According to Mayor Ali, Marawi does not have a "religious police," but ad hoc ulama (Islamic scholar) groups exist in the city that could serve this enforcement function. Local police officials had a "vague awareness" of the ordinances, but appear indifferent to enforcement, officials noted. Marawi also has a Sharia (Islamic law) court, but so far there have not been any prosecutions under the new ordinances, according to officials. (Note: It is not clear whether authorities have levied fines under these ordinances yet. End note)

110. (SBU) Manila-based Department of Interior and Local Government Undersecretary Wencelito Andanar separately predicted to poloff that such ordinances would not stand up to scrutiny under the Philippines' secular constitution, adding that it would be "interesting" to see a challenge reach the Supreme Court. He admitted that this would "take a long time."

Christian-Muslim Coexistence

111. (SBU) Marawi Catholic Bishop Edwin de la Pena, who presides over around 2,000 in the Marawi Prelate of six

parishes, cited challenges in being the de facto leader of a tiny religious minority. He noted "prejudice" from both Muslims and Christians, and occasional deadly violence, which claimed the life of a foreign missionary priest in 2001. He complained that violence goes unchecked and murders unsolved, and voiced suspicions of the involvement of the local drug trade. He said that he tries to serve as an intermediary with the city government on behalf of his followers, although he has no official political representative role. He claimed that Marawi leaders readily listened to and cooperated with Marawi's Christians. In one instance, the city cleaned up a litter-strewn thoroughfare in front of the main church in Marawi. There are also local organizations through which Christians and Muslims learn about reconciliation and interfaith understanding, he added.

Other Social Woes

12. (SBU) According to local observers, Marawi is plagued by several social problems, including drugs and clan-based feuds (known locally as "rido"). City officials said that many young people are now addicted to methamphetamine (locally known as "shabu"). City councilors and police blamed "outsiders from Manila" or transnational traffickers from "China and Taiwan." Several students said that they suspected local politicians were complicit in the trade. Councilor Mapupuno suggested that high local unemployment and the lack of positive activities for the young contributed to the problem. Other city officials lamented the lack of a family-oriented sports league or a rehabilitation center.

13. (SBU) In examples of the "rido" problem (ref b), officials described the deaths of at least seven government troops and 12 others in late January in a firefight between influential Maranao families in Tuburan, Lanao del Sur Province, about 40 miles south of Marawi. Councilor Mapupuno opined that such disputes are best handled outside the "distrusted Philippine justice system" through a culturally preferred "Elders' Council" that arbitrates disputes on a case-by-case basis. The Council determines settlements that range from directed intermarriage (to join families together) to blood money. However, additional vendetta killings often occur when one party is reluctant or unable to pay, according to the Councilor.

Comment: A City Open To Engagement

14. (SBU) Marawi is truly a unique part of the Philippines, which, like other Mindanao cities, has its share of challenges. While coping with its problems, the city strives to establish and maintain its conservative Islamic identity, although it remains open to US engagement. US public diplomacy programs are prevalent at MSU, which is a welcoming platform for speakers from the Embassy and visiting lecturers from the US. The American Studies Resource Center is a useful hub for MSU students interested in US topics and education programs. USAID is active in the city, with a range of development assistance initiatives, including offering computer and internet education for several local high schools and matching funds for community organizations committed to school improvement. End Comment.

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